

Journal Topics, May 7, 2008

Are young children safe on their home computers? Are there restrictions on what they are and are not allowed to see?

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (10th) Monday was joined by Mt. Prospect Mayor Irvana Wilks, Mt. Prospect Police Chief John Dahlberg and officer Dirk Ollech, 10th Congressional district parents and teachers Janet Joy and Bonnie Graham of Arlington Hts. in discussing the need for federal action to protect youngsters from predators and registered sex offenders on "Second Life" and other social networking websites.

The event was held at the Mt. Prospect Police station.

"During the past five years, social networking websites like MySpace, Facebook and Second Life exploded in popularity," said Kirk. "As more kids flock to these sites, we've seen a corresponding increase of online sexual predators targeting children."

He said that according to a U.S. Dept. of Justice survey, one-in-five kids has been sexually solicited online.

"As new technologies develop, more disturbing revelations unfold," said Kirk. "Sites like Second Life offer no protections to keep kids from virtual 'rape rooms,' brothels and drug stores. If sites like Second Life won't protect kids from obviously inappropriate content, the Congress will."

To raise parent awareness of these growing "threats," Kirk sent a letter Monday to the chairman of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requesting a consumer alert warning about the dangers of Second Life.

On the site, kids create an online persona called an "avatar," and interact with the program's more than four million users

According to Kirk, while Second Life claims to prevent children under the age of 13 from accessing the site, there are no age verification features built into the registration process.

He said Second Life's lawyers admit that its "teen area" may have adults prowling and the adult area may have children present.

Outside the pre-approved "teen area" are locations where users engage in virtual prostitution, drug use and other activities. Drug dealers and predators routinely attempt to contact users in the real world once a meeting happens in Second Life.

He detailed his legislation to help parents play a larger role in the safety of their children. He introduced the bipartisan Deleting Online Predators Act, which passed in the House in 2006 by an overwhelming vote of 410 to 15, but did not see Senate action. The bill currently has 91 bipartisan co-sponsors. The Act requires schools to prevent children from accessing social networking websites and chat rooms like MySpace unless they are doing so for a legitimate educational purpose and are under adult supervision. It also requires public libraries to prevent children from accessing those websites unless they have the permission of a parent.

The Predator's Act also requires that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in 90 days:

- * Create a website with a distinctive Uniform Resource Locator to educate parents, teachers, school officials and others regarding the dangers on the Internet to child users.

- * Issue consumer alerts to parents, teachers, school officials and others regarding the potential dangers of Internet child predators and their ability to contact children through commercial networking sites like MySpace and chat rooms.

The Predator's Act requires that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) establish an advisory board to review and report commercial social networking sites like MySpace and chat rooms that allow sexual predators easy access to personal information of, and contact with, children. According to I-Safe America, nearly one-third of kids have chatted with strangers on the Internet, and 12% have met online strangers in person.

With more than 150 million registered users on MySpace, sexual predators can access children's detailed personal information including last name, address, phone number, school, schedule and photograph. Last year, the Illinois Attorney General discovered nearly 850 registered sex offenders in Illinois who use MySpace.

Mt. Prospect was home to one of the first online child exploitation crimes. More than 10 years ago, an adult man posing as a child on the Internet lured a sixth-grade boy. The Florida-based predator convinced the child to board a bus for a rendezvous. Quick action by the police department and the FBI prevented the child from reaching the criminal, police said.

Demonstrating the risks on MySpace, Mt. Prospect police officers created a fictional profile of a 15-year-old Mt. prospect girl. A 29-year-old man sent the fake girl a message, calling her "adorable" and asked to get to know her better. An individual also encouraged her to prostitute herself by sending her a message about a companionship service in Elk Grove Village.

Mt. Prospect Police Chief John Dahlberg said his investigators have conducted "the most extensive investigations" to ensure children in Mt. Prospect are safe from sexual predators.

"We are committed to educate parents to ensure their children's safety at home," said Dahlberg.

Kirk added that the biggest challenge to get the bill passed is to sway members of the Senate, because computers and the Internet were never part of their childhood.

Illinois' 10th Congressional Dist. contains portions of both Cook and Lake counties stretching from Wilmette on the south through Waukegan and from Lake Michigan west through parts of Arlington Heights and Palatine. The district includes all or part of the following townships:

Waukegan, Warren, Shields, Moraine, West Deerfield, Vernon, Libertyville, New Trier, Northfield, Wheeling, Elk Grove and Palatine.

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines.